



# radical democracy

interview w/  
**yotam marom**  
occupy wall street  
occupy sandy  
the wildfire project



## **David Olson interviews Yotma Moram for Radical Democracy.**

**Yotam Marom** is an activist, organizer, educator, and writer based in New York City. Yotam began anti-war organizing high school, was part of a student strike at McGill University, and helped lead an occupation at the New School in NYC. e teaching in a Palestinian school, and helped start an educational collective in NY. Yotam was an early organizer in Occupy Wall Street and later with Occupy Sandy.

He is a founder and director of The Wildfire Project, a movement-building non-profit group. Wildfire trains, supports, and links grassroots groups, laying the foundation for a powerful movement toward political, economic, and ecological justice.



**Radical Democracy:** Tell me a little about the Wildfire Project. What sort of groups do you work with and what are the goals of the project?

## **Yotam Marom Interview continued**

**Yotam Marom:** Basically we take organizing groups through long-term training programs. The groups are usually pretty young, pretty scrappy, coming out of movement moments, or out of crisis — like Hurricane Sandy or the death of Trayvon Martin — and so on.

They're usually underfunded, pretty progressive, use direct action. We take them through a training program that combines political education with a lot of group work, and also some of the skills to then do that work with their base, and do it all using experiential educational methods. So the political or educational work is meant to help the groups get a deeper sense of the systems underneath the issues that they're facing, and get them to share insight with each other.

Some of the group work is on an individual level, helping individuals get through the barriers keeping them from being their most powerful versions of themselves. Some of it is dynamic work on the bigger picture — trust building and relationship building, and so on. As we get to know the group, we also see issues come up dealing with race, class, and gender, and [we] support them in those issues.

## **Yotam Marom Interview continued**

**The idea really is that we're using the group work to support groups to thrive, to stay in the movement and achieve their purpose. And to connect them to each other, to deepen the network of movement groups being born in this time.**

**RD:** Wildfire Project's emphasis on connecting groups to each other, and of helping to facilitate a "movement of movements" is an idea we really like at the Radical Democracy Project. Could you talk a bit about that? With so many organizations popping up right now, how do you help facilitate communication and interconnectedness?

**YM:** In addition to the group processes we do with each one of the organizations, we also have programs that connect across groups. About a year and a half ago we had trained eight groups or so: brought about twenty people from each group to meet and think strategically together, and to start to imagine what the coming movement moments were going to be around. Some relationships made in that space ended up being really pivotal in Black Lives Matter a short time after.

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## Yotam Marom Interview continued

We're very transparent about the fact that we're a movement-building organization. **We're not just training individuals, or even groups, we're trying to help people see themselves as part of a broader ecosystem.** Part of the reason we do political education work is to help give people the language to identify each other.

We're seeing a lot of groups being born in similar circumstances, of crisis and opportunity. And because of that they have really similar make-ups: they're fast-paced, led by young people, trying to be multiracial, they use direct action — a lot of similarities are already baked in. What we're trying to do is give them the tools to be able to identify each other as partners — in the street, and in their work in the future. That's part of the reason that we do political education.

**RD:** How much of the political education work you do with groups has to do with movement history, and how important is that, in your view?

**YM:** I think it's super important for folks to know history, and movement history, specifically. I wish we did more of it.

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## Yotam Marom Interview continued

**YM:** One of the things we do with all the groups is have them tell their origin stories — sometimes skits, sometimes in timelines, stuff like that. Not only for them to mark the things their organization has done, they also mark the political conditions that led to their organizations, and the movement history that preceded their organizations, to have a bigger-picture understanding of why they even exist.

So that's one of the ways we deal with history that's been really interesting and fruitful. In our more advanced work **we've started to study the roles organized leaders and organized revolutionaries have had throughout history, leading and guiding movements.** That's been really interesting, too.

**RD:** You wrote a piece recently about your experience in the early days of Occupy — on the dilemma of being a leader in a supposedly leaderless movement. Could you comment about that, and about how Wildfire looks at the question of leadership?



## Yotam Marom Interview continued

**YM:** Wildfire is just starting to make intervention around leadership, and actually recognizing it, appreciating it where it exists, holding it accountable, and benefiting from it. I think the Movement has a really hard time with that right now. We're in an era where movements are very wary of leaders — particularly, the types of leaders that fit into classic archetypes. Like, "eloquent white dude" kind of archetypes — not only, but I think particularly suspicious of that — and that comes from a lot of really interesting places.

First of all, movements have really been burned by following that kind of leadership in the past. And the generation that you were talking about earlier, in the '60s, definitely had its share of really difficult splits over that, and learned really important lessons of people getting fucked up in those positions and leading movements into difficult places.

**The movement is kind of illiterate about class right now, and one of the results is a politics more about how we feel, and our identities, rather than about winning concrete material gains for people.** That's not true across the board, and a lot of people are trying to counteract those patterns, but I think it's important to face. The result is a politics afraid of power.

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## Yotam Marom Interview continued

**YM:** Leadership is one way power plays out — and that we get to see power in action — but it's not the only way. I think the sort of fetish of leaderlessness is in part a product of a really deep fear of the enemy. Because the enemy, or the systems that we're trying to face, are really, really big, and powerful, and violent, and scary. Our movements do not have a good track record of winning against them.

And it's actually a lot more comfortable to not be powerful. That's true on an individual level, and on a collective level. So **I think the leaderlessness stuff is really just bound up in that bigger conflict: “Are we actually trying to win?”** I spent a lot of time in the movement — years — before anybody asked me if I wanted to win anything, or what it would take for me to be my most powerful self.

**RD:** This seems to me a major shift on the Left: that we are talking about winning, not just playing defense against an all-powerful, corporate-backed foe. What would winning, in the big sense, mean to you? What does that world look like?



## Yotam Marom Interview continued

**YM:** Man, you're really going for it. On a really basic level, I think **the world that we're fighting for is one where people have the ability, the agency, and the decision-making power about the things that shape their lives.** People should have decision-making power according to the extent that they are impacted by the outcome of the decision — which is really the opposite of how the system is now. That's one piece in a much bigger puzzle of creating an economic and political and social system that, because it's guided by people's decisions about things that impact them, actually has the ability to meet people's real needs.

There are two ways to think about the question of, “What do we actually want for people?” Part of it is: Yes, we want a system that actually meets people's needs, and this one clearly doesn't. But the other part is that we want a system that can actually meet the incredible human potential being squandered. If we want to have a practical conversation about it, there's a lot more to say about that. But on a big-picture level, **we want a participatory, socialist society — where people get their needs met, and get to develop their immense amount of potential.**



## Yotam Marom Interview continued

That means getting at the roots of the systems that keep us from that now. There are a lot of things we can win along the way. It'd really be nice to have a social democracy to fight against instead of this collapsing neoliberal empire. I think

**in the big picture we're talking about dismantling the really big and powerful systems that govern the institutions and values that in turn govern our lives: racism, capitalism and patriarchy.**

**RD:** Moving towards a “practical conversation,” as you call it, what would be some first steps towards dismantling some of those systems, and creating more just systems that are built on the people’s needs?

**YM:** It sounds kind of hokey but honestly, Bernie's platform is a really great start. Right now, his platform sounds incredibly radical. In reality, it's a pretty basic understanding that people's needs aren't being met, and that's bad for everyone, for the collective, too — and totally unsustainable on an economic but also a planetary level.



## Yotam Marom Interview continued

YM: A really nice first step would be people getting some of their needs met — just very basic, obvious needs. **We live in a society where there are more empty homes than people without homes. Yet the logic of the market means that those people can't have those homes. That's a rotten system, not a broken system: it was meant to do this.**

But it doesn't work for most of us. We'd get closer to people participating in the systems around them if they didn't have to work two or three jobs or spend hours of their weekend on the phone with healthcare companies. Really basic shit.

Ultimately, the world we want can't be given to us by politicians. Even those kind of basic reforms are only being talked about now in the mainstream because movements made them popular. **The momentum around Bernie is actually the product of movements. We know we don't get anything for free from the system, and we're going to need movements to win that other world.**



## Yotam Marom Interview continued

**YM:** So the question is, how do we fight now in a way that puts us in a position to win more later? What do we choose to fight about, and so we're winning things along the way, and putting ourselves in a better a position to win more in the future?

**RD:** You've been movement organizing, both winning things along the way, and fighting for large scale, radical change for most of your life. Why this work so important to you?

**YM: I'm really kind of heartbroken by the amount of human potential that's squandered in this system. I feel acutely aware of the possibilities of what could be.** I've seen people be big and powerful and beautiful and creative and loving and warm. We have the capacity to be that, just like we have the capacity to be anything else. And it hurts to see that wasted — whether a young black kid shot by a cop, or because they live in Fallujah and they're being bombed, or they're just trying to survive the ugliness of this system — whatever side they think they're on.

You know, I just really believe in people. And I think this system's a waste of us.



## Yotam Marom Interview continued

**RD:** Are you hopeful, right now? That we will get our shit together, and turn the boat around, so to speak?

**YM:** In a big picture sense, I'm really hopeful. This level of movement is unprecedented — or at least it hasn't happened in a very long time. We're in a moment of huge upsurge and rebellion. **There are people in the streets, really throwing down and taking risks, coming up with new ideas, new ways to do the work, new lessons drawn from the opportunities we've had.** I think we're getting to the place where we're gonna need to be. And at the same time, we're seeing that the whole country is preparing itself — and that's really inspiring.

But there's a scary side to this moment, too. Shit's not going to stay the way it is now. It's just not.

**It's going to get better, or it's going to get worse, but it's not going to stay like this.**

That's one of the most obvious things that we're learning from this election cycle: the establishment is over. The Clinton legacy is dead. Even if she wins, this is the end of the Clinton era.

## Yotam Marom Interview continued

**YM: There's got to be something new, and maybe it'll be a populist fascism, maybe it'll be a social democracy. But this version of the Empire is gasping its last breaths.**

**And I think the real big question is; who's going to be there to provide the next thing?**

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